

Book Review:

Clarence A. Andrews, *A Literary History of Iowa* (Iowa City: The University of Iowa Press, 1972), 256 pp., plus bibliography and index, \$12.50.

What is the purpose of a book review? The answer varies from magazine to magazine. In academic journals, book reviews serve not only to inform scholars how a book fits into their world, but also to establish the credentials of the reviewer. In literary magazines, reviews provide a forum for critics to appraise the work of writers. A book review in the *Palimpsest* should be, I think, slightly different. Members of the Society are interested in Iowa history; therefore, when a notable book is published on a historical Iowa topic, the readers should be informed. The reviewer should have no axe to grind. In addition to alerting members to the book, some attempt should be made to state whether or not the author performed his tasks well. Books cost considerable sums these days and members should not have to take a \$10 or \$12 gamble.

It is in this spirit that I report on Clarence Andrews' *A Literary History of Iowa*, a long overdue and much needed book. Such a book should collect and compress the sweep of Iowa literature into one volume, where a sense of literary tradition and specific information can be neatly gathered. Andrews fulfills some of these obligations and falls short of others.

From one historical point of view, Andrews' method of organization causes problems. The book does not follow a chronology of authorship (early writers first) but rather a chronology of subject matter. The first chapters deal with the historical events of the early nineteenth century, whether they were put on paper then or now. Thus, Abel Beach, an early pioneer and poet, is discussed in the same paragraph with MacKinlay Kantor. This practice is confusing to the reader, especially since three chapters later Andrews drops this structure and takes up authors more or less in chronological order. Andrews says in his introduction that he shows the historical and social context of Iowa literature, but he does so in the most elementary way.

Individual authors are treated unevenly, some minor figures given fairly lengthy consideration while others of seemingly equal note are barely mentioned. Overall, there is an unfinished quality to the book, including prose that is often awkward or unclear.

There are, however, positive things to say for Andrews' work. The chapters devoted to Iowa's better known authors, Hamlin Garland, Herbert Quick, Ruth Suckow, Phil Stong and Frederick Manfred, are excellent. Andrews explains their work in an orderly and perceptive fashion. More importantly, because he quotes national critics, the reputation of the state's literature comes into perspective.

The great attribute of the book is to make it clear that Iowa's heritage includes a powerful and consistent literary tradition. A remarkable number of Iowans have written epic series about the land, the people, and the Iowa experience. There is a long list of writers from Garland to Paul Corey, who have created fascinating fictional communities and played out fully the inherent creative possibilities. Pittsville, Siouxland, and the Middle Border are the most famous, but almost every important Iowa author seems to have been touched in some way by this inspiration.

If nothing else, Clarence Andrews has revealed the depth of the literary history of Iowa.

Andrews ends his study of the past with a thought for the future of Iowa letters:

"Iowa, what is there to sing? As the nation faces its bicentennial, beset with fear and plagued with doubt, perhaps a new generation of writers and artists, raised in the lush green of an Iowa farm or the streets of an Iowa small town, or even in one of the state's larger cities, will find answers to the first and, at the same time, solutions to the latter—and a new Iowa literature will arise. (p. 256).

L.E.P.